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Providing Peace of Mind at the Most Critical of Times

Susan Bysiewicz

Imagine that you are traveling out of state and are involved in a car accident. You are taken to the emergency room unconscious, and emergency personnel race to provide you with critical medical attention. However, these professionals have never seen you before and have no way of knowing what your wishes might be.

How will the doctors know if you have a Living Will, or a health care power of attorney, or some other form of advance health care directive? How will they know if you have legally recorded your wishes for extraordinary life-saving measures?

This kind of situation occurs every day. A Living Will or health care power of attorney only works when the professionals giving the care know about it.

That is why my office is proposing the creation of an Advance Health Care Directive Registry, an online repository where this information can be stored safely and securely and can be accessible to health care providers and family members in a time of medical crisis. Think of it as a “virtual filing cabinet,” safeguarded with a password to protect it from outside intruders.

Our office has asked the Legislature to pass legislation allowing the creation of this registry by the late summer or early fall. It will be a service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for any Connecticut resident who currently has a Living Will or other type of advance care directive, and will be free of charge to all who use it. Two states, North Carolina and Arizona, have already created such registries with much success.

There are three reasons why we need this registry in Connecticut:

- Individuals get added peace of mind in knowing that critical health care information is stored safely and securely and always accessible;
- Family members should not carry the burden of having to guess what their loved ones would want in a given situation; and finally,
- Health care professionals need certainty in carrying out patients’ wishes.

This registry would be kept by the Office of the Secretary of the State, and would work very simply. A person with a Living Will would bring it to the Secretary of the State’s office. The document would be scanned, and once the person gave final approval, would be placed in the registry. That person would then receive a card in the mail – much like a credit card or an organ donor card – which would contain a website address and a

password. Family members, doctors, or lawyers could be given copies of this card, in case an emergency ever arose. In the event of a serious injury or accident far from home, emergency health care providers could find the card and access the information immediately.

Why is this important? Even if an individual has a Living Will on file in a lawyer's office, what happens if that lawyer is on vacation, or if the document needs to be accessed in the middle of the night or on the weekend? With this registry, these concerns are addressed.

Advocates such as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the Connecticut Commission on Aging, and the Connecticut Hospice Inc. have joined my office in endorsing this legislation, and I am glad to have had their help in crafting it.

People who fill out advance health care directives do so to ensure that even in those moments when they cannot speak for themselves, their wishes can be carried out. This registry provides a way to locate and reference these directives at a moment's notice; often times, that is how quickly they are needed.

This legislation will help give peace of mind to families and loved ones during the most difficult of times. And that relief is something for which we all hope.

Susan Bysiewicz is the Secretary of the State